

Just what the doctor ordered

We've always known that a little of what you fancy does you good, and now science has discovered exactly why. Jane Hughes reports on the good you'll be doing your mind and body when you eat, drink and make merry this Christmas. Photograph David Parfitt

Parties. Quality Street. Drink, and more drink. Sound familiar? If the approaching Christmas season has you contemplating a timeout from healthy living (why go to the gym or stick to a diet when there's the office do and your mum's Boxing Day breakfast to enjoy?), we have some positively brilliant news. Feelings of pleasure – that's everything from laughing to eating chocolate – are good for you. Researchers in the growing field of psychoneuroimmunology, or mind/body medicine to you and me, have proved that these mood boosters also improve your physical wellbeing, strengthen your immune system and relieve stress that might otherwise lead to chronic illness. Now, doesn't that make you feel fantastic?

A group of scientists at the Associates for Research Into the Science of Enjoyment (ARISE) has shown that enjoyment activates 'the pleasure pathway', a complex neurochemical signalling system in the brain. The best known neurotransmitters are the 'feel-good' endorphins – the type triggered as you dance along to Beyoncé in front of the Christmas episode of *Top of the Pops* – but other neuropeptides can also increase the production of cells that fend off diseases and reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

When we are anxious, our fight-or-flight response is to increase cortisol, which in turn mobilises blood sugar to transfer energy to muscles. That's fine for short periods, but prolonged high levels of cortisol can damage body organs, particularly the stomach, heart and brain. They have also been linked to depression, and over-stimulation and suppression of the immune system. Too much cortisol can also mobilise stored fatty acids, as well as cholesterol, which may block arteries. More commonly, we will experience chronic fatigue as our adrenal glands become exhausted.

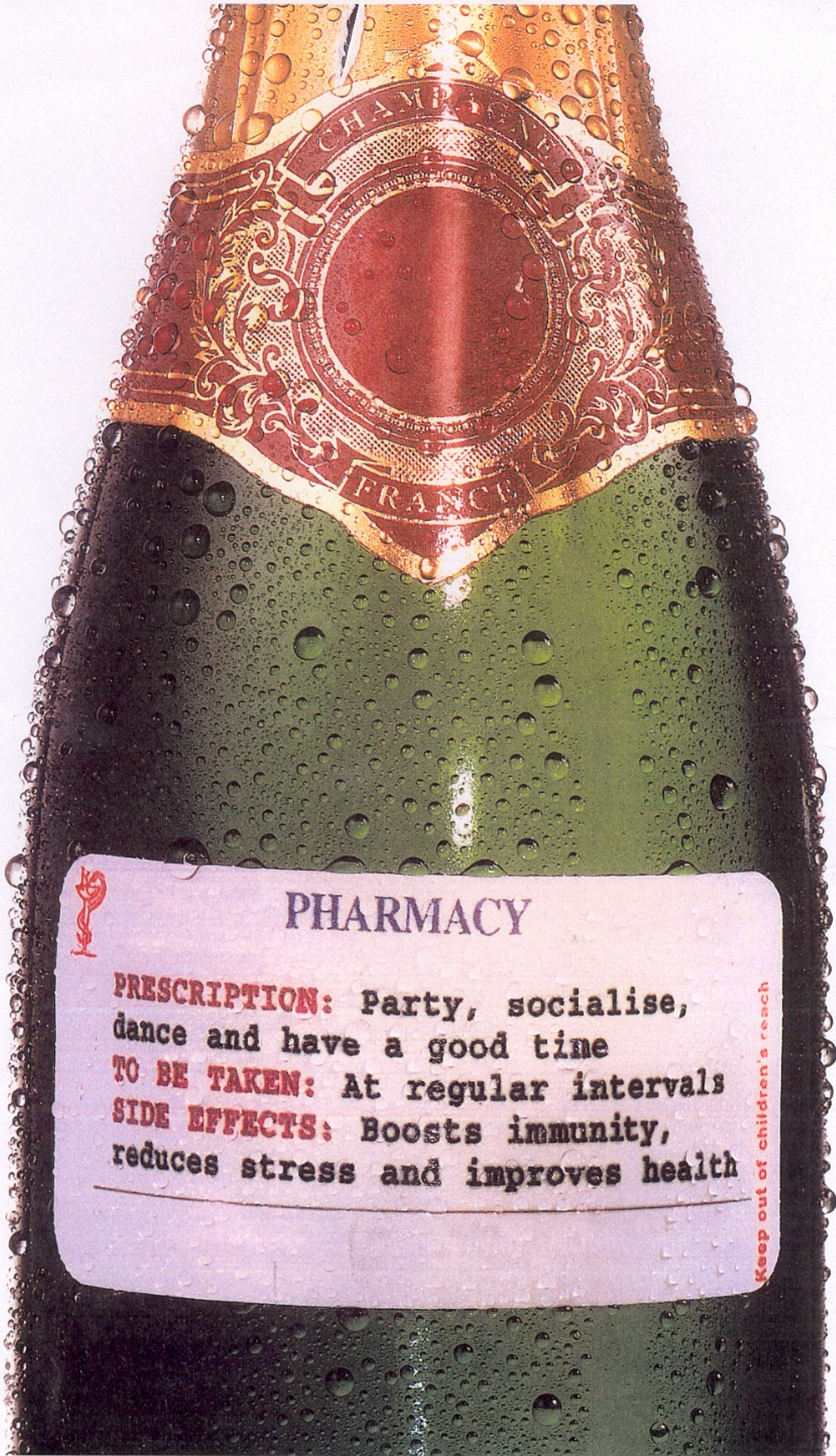
The good news is, lowering our cortisol levels may be simpler than we think. University of Westminster

psychologist Dr Angela Clow has discovered that pleasurable experiences, such as smelling chocolate, reduce levels of cortisol and increase production of the antibody immunoglobulin A, which helps to fight respiratory infections. David Warburton, head of ARISE and professor of psychopharmacology at the University of Reading, has demonstrated that simply recalling a pleasurable memory has the same beneficial effects. And work by health psychologist Dr Geoff Lowe at the University of Hull shows that a change of environment or an interruption to routine can help prevent the build-up of worry – so however full-on the Christmas period is, you can take heart from the fact that simply having a break from everyday life (even if it is accompanied by a huge intake of mince pies), will benefit your overall health. But there's even more you can do to put a healthy spin on the party season...

Invite your friends over

Strong social ties don't just mean you're popular, they also boost your wellbeing. Researchers who exposed volunteers to the cold virus found that those with more social ties were less likely to develop symptoms. 'It may be hard to believe that something as simple as talking with friends, feeling close to your parents and sharing feelings openly can make such a powerful difference to your health and wellbeing, but study after study indicates that this is the case,' says US doctor Dean Ornish, author of *Love & Survival* (HarperCollins, around £9).

Don't fancy having a party? Just cosy up with your partner instead. According to Ornish, studies reveal that married people live longer and have a lower incidence of disease than those who are single, widowed or divorced. But saying that, US researchers also found that couples who argue a lot had weakened immune systems. In addition, monitoring of 90 newlywed couples during a timed discussion of marital problems



PHARMACY

PRESCRIPTION: Party, socialise, dance and have a good time

TO BE TAKEN: At regular intervals

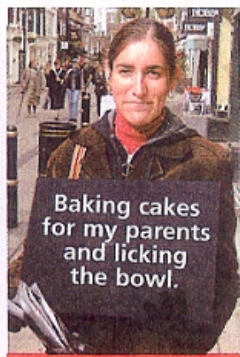
SIDE EFFECTS: Boosts immunity, reduces stress and improves health

Keep out of children's reach

What's your Christmas indulgence?



Anda, 38, housewife



Charlotte, 28, works for a perfume company



Melina, 28, beautician



Samantha, 33, housewife



Victoria, 29, student



Sarah, 30, window dresser

found that those who exhibited the most negative behaviour had the greatest increases in blood pressure and suffered negative immunological changes.

According to Dorothy Rowe, psychologist and author of *Beyond Fear* (HarperCollins, £12.99), the pleasurable feelings of security in a successful relationship have a powerful influence on your wellbeing. 'If you come home to somebody who will listen without criticism as you let out your frustrations and then give you a hug or make you dinner, you are going to feel better,' she says, but acknowledges that having strong friendships with people you can talk to can be equally important. 'Acknowledging fear by talking about it decreases anxiety, with accompanying physiological changes. Your heart rate slows, your breathing gets deeper (emptying the lungs of any excess carbon dioxide) and your body is able to function more efficiently.' Conversely, prolonged fear or anxiety - particularly when aggravated by people around you - tightens muscles, causing headaches, neck and back pain, and can lead to a breakdown of the immune system.

Have a laugh

Studies carried out in the US, where hundreds of hospitals run humour programmes, show that a good laugh reduces levels of stress hormones while increasing production of antibodies and killer cells. It also improves circulation and even acts as a mini-workout, exercising abdominal, facial and chest muscles, and relieving tension. (So watching that *Only Fools and Horses* Christmas special - again - may be as good as doing an hour's aerobics class).

Even a fake smile or laugh is beneficial because it will send an internal message that you can't possibly be sad. Ben Renshaw of

'Happy people live longer and are healthier, but feeling guilty about pleasure does more harm than good'

the Happiness Project, which runs public workshops and advises on workplace relations, says being happy 'means accepting yourself and your capabilities, even if you don't think they're good enough'. Once we begin to enjoy the moment and value what is truly important, Ben believes we are then able to relax, both physically and mentally.

The crucial factor is not to feel guilty about having a good time. An international study of 4,000 people by ARISE

demonstrated a direct link between the production of antibodies and the amount of pleasure derived from various activities. British women gave sex, eating chocolate and shopping the highest pleasure ratings, but they also felt more guilty than men about enjoying pleasure. 'Happy people live longer and are healthier,' says David Warburton, 'but feeling guilty about pleasure does more harm than good because it activates stress hormones and, in turn, this diverts energy away from productive activities.'

Let your hair down

My favourite indulgence is going on a big night out with friends at London's Kitsch Lounge Riot night. It's held at the Café de Paris - a truly glamorous, fun place where it seems only protocol to drink bellinis. There's a cabaret, and the music - a heady mix of swing, easy-listening and other tunes - is the kind that keeps you up on the dance floor all night long. The only thing is, I haven't yet managed to marry such decadence with moderation.

Not a problem, says Warburton, who has identified three main components of

pleasure: anticipation, enjoyment and recollection. 'Anticipation is a conditioned response that activates the pleasure pathways, while enjoyment and then recollection continue to stimulate these pathways and help "vaccinate" against stress,' he says.

Enhancing pleasure through ritual can help us focus on and savour each experience, so making a special occasion of shopping for clothes and make-up or getting ready for a night out with friends acts as a wake-up call to our more sensual sides.

To fend off guilt, it helps to build these components into a reward system - looking forward to having a glass of wine as you get ready for a night out on the town, for instance. Experiencing pleasure is a way of protecting ourselves from illness, but remember, our bodies have their own self-regulating and satiating systems. Okay, downing a bottle or two is going to leave you with an almighty hangover, but it's also the case that repeated exposure, to chocolate or wine for example, desensitises our neuropeptide receptors, so that our awareness - and the benefits - of pleasure lessen as we consume more. So it seems that the old cliché is true, a little of what you fancy really does do you good. And we'd like to

drop another thought into the mix: it's Christmas, so enjoy yourself - it's good for your health, you know!

